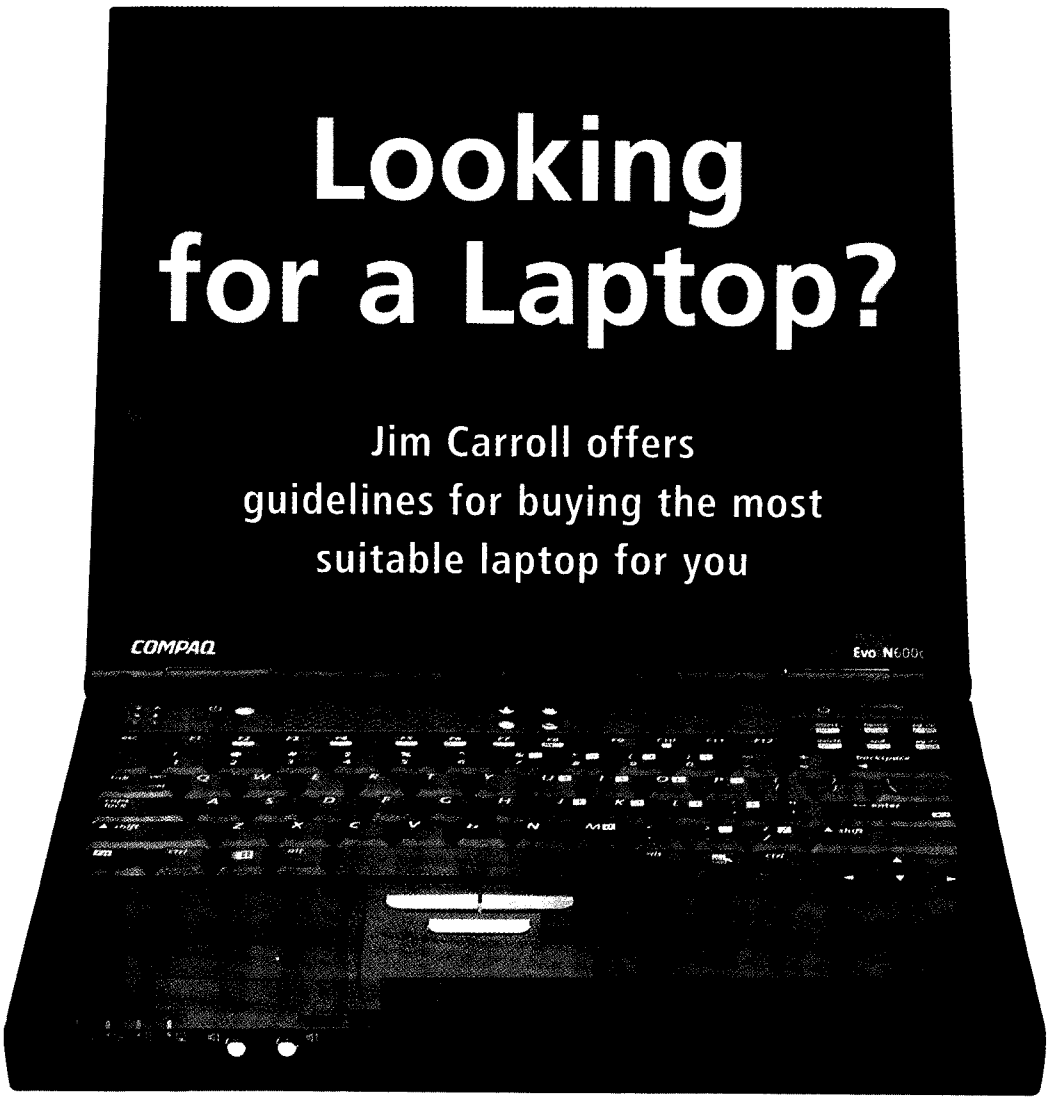
By Jim Carroll

Looking for a Laptop?

Jim Carroll offers guidelines for buying the most suitable laptop for you



Although the Canadian-made Hyperion was arguably the world's first portable computer, beating Compaq to market by a matter of months, it wasn't exactly the epitome of lightweight computing. Thinking back to those days, I must have been quite a sight as I lugged the 22-pound monster back and forth everyday between the office and my apartment, a distance of about 2 miles.

Today, of course, portability is another thing altogether. We have a wide variety of laptops to choose from, with a dizzying assortment of features to think about. How do you go about ensuring that you've chosen the right machine with the right features?

It can be quite a challenge, since once you venture into the product literature, you find complex buzzwords, acronyms, and techie-geek-speak. So what should you be looking for? Let me try and explain in plain English. There are a few basic considerations amongst the wide range of features, and each of your choices will have a bearing on the total price of the laptop.

Portability and weight. The portable market really consists of two segments. There are the "ultra-light," laptops which usually weigh less than four pounds or so. In this category is the Omnibook 500 from Hewlett-Packard, that weighs in at 3.5 pounds.

To achieve such weight saving, various components such as a DVD and CDROM are usually stripped out, so that you have the lightest machine possible and compromises are made in terms of screen size, and other features. If that is not feasible for you, there are the regular laptops which offer a full set of features, including a CDROM and DVD. Of course, as with anything technology related, the lines between the two categories is blurring – the Toshiba Portege 4000 model, for example, weighs in at just 4.3 lbs, but provides a CDROM or DVD. And there is the Hewlett-Packard Omnibook XE3, which is also an all-in-one laptop.

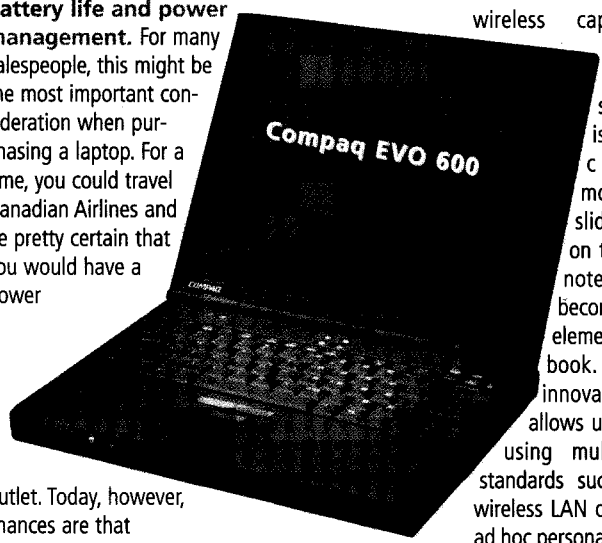
Screen size and screen resolution. These are extremely important factors when it comes to the ease of working with a laptop. In our offices, many of us are using 17" monitors, and some of us are lucky enough to have a 19" monitor or larger. If we end up using a laptop that features less "real estate" (i.e. less space), then we're going to find that our working style is cramped. You'll find that laptop screens can range from 10" to 15" – that's the direct size of the screen that you see. And yet, you also need to consider the screen resolution – that's the number of "dots" that make up the screen. Most laptops today feature a resolution of at least 1024x768 (anything below that, you'll get quite frustrated). For a more comfortable working experience, go with a higher resolution, such as 1280x1024 or 1400x1050. And if you really have money to spend, you'll find some

laptops that provide you with a whopping 1600x1200 resolution.

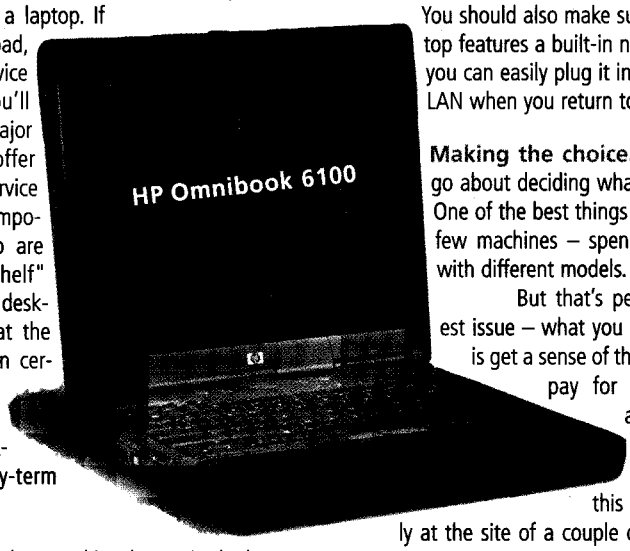
DVD: Any serious road warrior will want to ensure that they've got the ability to watch a movie on the road. An increasing number of laptops come with a built-in DVD player instead of a CDROM, with a price premium that can be as little as a few hundred dollars more. Definitely worth considering!

Multimedia (i.e. video camera/ microphone/speakers). While most laptops almost always featured a microphone and speakers, the quality of what is offered nowadays has dramatically improved. Speaker quality can be important if you want to take along your favorite CD's or MP3's on a business trip. Some of the hottest units also sport a built-in video camera, which can be an important capability for video conferencing or still-shots. The SONY VAIO Picturebook is great in this regard – it features a small camera built right into the "lid," positioned just above the screen. You can use it either for still digital images or for video, extending the capability of your laptop. Other laptop models might provide a camera as an option that clips into the top of the screen, or you can link any stand-alone Webcam into the laptops' USB port. Last but not least, think about additional multimedia capabilities such as digital video editing (if you are interested in editing your own video) and digital video output (or S-Video, which enables you to send the signal from your DVD or PowerPoint presentation to the television in your hotel room or meetingroom, so you can watch it on a larger screen).

Battery life and power management. For many salespeople, this might be the most important consideration when purchasing a laptop. For a time, you could travel Canadian Airlines and be pretty certain that you would have a power outlet. Today, however, chances are that you won't have power at your disposal unless you travel on one of Air Canada's newer planes, and so you'll want to carefully judge how much battery life you will get out of your laptop. Closely related to battery life are power management features – look for Intel SpeedStep technology, which automatically adjusts the way that the laptop uses power, depending on what you are doing. Also, some vendors offer extra batteries with the laptop – for example, Dell often does this. Performance-hungry users – including multimedia presentation makers – will cherish the HP Omnibook 6100's up to eight hours of battery power.



Service and warranty. It might simply be a personal point of preference, but I would never go non-name brand with a laptop. If you are on the road, and you need service and support, you'll find that all the major manufacturers offer some type of service plan. Plus, the components in a laptop are less "off-the-shelf" than found with desktops, meaning that the cost of repairs can certainly be higher than with a desktop – hence, making the warranty-term very important!



Wireless LAN. What good is a laptop in the home or office if you have to plug it in all the time? There's a revolution going on with wireless LANs, and it is a marvelous capability. In my home, I have a 3Com Wireless AirConnect LAN. This means that with a little card inside my PC, I can take my laptop anywhere in the house and I'm plugged in and online. An increasing number of laptops are coming with built-in wireless capability (also known as Wi-Fi). The Compaq N600c features integrated wireless capabilities via MultiPort, a Compaq exclusive. MultiPort is an interchangeable module that slides into place on the back of the notebook and becomes an integral element of the notebook. This flexible, innovative solution allows users to connect using multiple wireless standards such as 802.11b wireless LAN or Bluetooth for ad hoc personal area networking, by simply changing out the MultiPort module.

Mice/Pointers. It's really all a matter of personal preference – some people swear by the little TrackPoint device found on IBM laptops, while others prefer the Touchpad found on Dell PCs. Bottom line? Try out the various pointing devices available before you buy!

Other must-have features. Most laptops today ship with a built-in modem so that you can access the Internet and email while on the road. You should also make sure that the laptop features a built-in network card so you can easily plug it into the corporate LAN when you return to the office.

Making the choice. So how do you go about deciding what's right for you? One of the best things to do is try out a few machines – spend a few minutes with different models.

But that's perhaps the smallest issue – what you really need to do is get a sense of the price that you'll pay for various features and capabilities. Fortunately, the Web has made this easier, particularly at the site of a couple of manufacturers. Some do a great job in letting you play around with pricing – at the websites of both Dell and Toshiba, for example, you can use an online configuration tool that starts out with a base model. You can then add and subtract from the many options above, in order to get a sense for what it is going to cost you for the best machine. Definitely worth using! C

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